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Dear Editor,

I hope this finds you well.

I'm writing to propose a nonfiction book on dramatic structure and the craft of playwriting for a Christian audience—the first of its kind in a market dominated by non-Christian authors. The title of the book is: *Stealing from Pirates - Notes on Plundering for Christian Dramatists*

With clear breakdowns of the classical and Biblical origins of dramatic structure, and sharp analysis of the methods, assumptions and secular eschatology of modern drama, *Stealing from Pirates* will guide readers to a deeper understanding of an artform that did more to shape the post-Christian West than they realize.

Moving from knowledge to action, with the strategic goal of reclaiming drama and live theater as robust artforms, this book will focus in on the craft, technique, and principles of writing for the stage, with examples from classics and the great secular playwrights (i.e. 'pirates') alike. Chapter by chapter, Christians itching to write, act, or direct will find practical advice and infusions of confidence.

Live theater may not dominate, but its cultural reach—with vast armies of actors, directors, students and future professionals within its ranks—remains an, secular-left wing monolith. For a number of reasons, from a longstanding inability to attract audiences under sixty, to theaters floundering in the ruthless Covid-19 lockdowns, to Broadway and regional players like the well-heeled Oregon Shakespeare Festival ruining productions with trendy gimmicks, excessive eye candy, and increasingly strident 'wokeness,' the artform and industry are on shaky ground.

Christian, or for that matter, conservative-leaning dramatists have long been outsiders. But with this secular Goliath tottering, it's now their cue to step up, innovate, and stage newer, better plays than anyone on the block.

A century and a half ago, European playwrights like Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov commandeered the cultural landscape, ushering in the moral relativism and secular humanism that would steer Europe for generations. Their plays shocked audiences, changing the way people thought about the world while paving stages (and soon enough, film sets) with the pointed dialogue, crackling subtlety, and indelible realism of modern drama. In their best impression of the European prophets, post-war Americans like Arthur Miller and David Mamet took up the mantle, posturing themselves as provocative outsiders in a largely Christian society.

But the terrain has shifted. In a post-Christian culture increasingly engulfed in dogmatic progressivism, the old pirates have lost their edge. Today's secular playwrights—more priesthood than buccaneers—raise no Jolly Roger; they peddle the same hum-drum orthodoxy of the 1960's to audiences of senior citizens.

For Christians willing to go beyond the safe, traveled venues—church skits, passion plays and, Pure Flix melodrama—the ingredients that capture an audience (old or young, believing or not, braced for tragedy or ready to laugh) are hidden in plain sight.

By studying the greats, (classic, modern, post-modern alike), plundering their techniques and writing excellent plays that recast the human struggle with true, unvarnished hope, Christian playwrights can reclaim their legacy, laboring proudly and honoring a Savior who reigns over every artform.

While the book aims at those who are knee deep, or at least curious about drama, live performance or creative writing, its message and content will appeal powerfully to those beyond the niche. Readers interested in literature, worldview, drama, theater history, and the broad, secular, theater landscape as it stands right now will find wind in their sails—and with that, some ammunition.

In hope that I've captured your interest, I've enclosed a chapter breakdown, a sixty page writing sample of several chapters, a page on this book and the market, and an about the author section.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

C.M. Miller



Stealing from Pirates



Notes on plundering for Christian dramatists

By C.M. Miller

The Pirates:

David Mamet, Harold Pinter, Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Tennessee Williams, John Patrick Shanley, Willy Russell, Lucas Hnath, Annie Baker, Carson McCullers, Vaclav Havel, August Wilson, Jason Robert Brown, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Anouilh, Aristotle, William Shakespeare, Monkey Butler and the Upright Citizen's Brigade

The Plunder:

- ‡ *Playwriting techniques for comedy, tragedy, sketch & improv*
- ‡ *Classic structure, short frames, plot dominoes, late arrivals, turns of character, subtext, forwards, exposition, bombs away, archetypal patterns, dramatic irony, spectacle, reversal, recognition, magnitude & unity, tragic impulse*
- ‡ *Criticism and context*
- ‡ *Tips for directors and actors*
- ‡ *Thunderous applause*

Book Outline

Stealing from Pirates breaks neatly into thirteen chapters that examine the technique, structure, reputation, worldview, and secular eschatology of modern and contemporary playwrights. Each chapter will contain brief biographies, breakdowns of worldview and core assumptions, structural analysis of one or two major works, and occasional dialogue samples to display technique and impact. Most chapters will include bullet-point takeaways on **key terms and techniques**, with short prompts and brainstorming suggestions for hungry playwrights.

Chapter One - Introduction: *From Pirates to Priesthood*

This chapter lays out the current American theatrical landscape, with enormous budgets and sky-high Broadway ticket prices papering over cracks in the dam—a stale recycling of progressive orthodoxy and the inability to draw in younger audiences. Working backward, we see parallels between the ‘outsider’ American playwrights and the original European shockers Ibsen and Chekhov, who rocked the 19th century landscape with secular humanism and moral relativism while ushering in modern theater.

Finally, this chapter touches directly on Theater and Christianity, with summaries of both the enormous contributions of Christians throughout the ages, and the church’s rocky relationship with theater since the closing of English playhouses in the late 1600’s. From here, we chart a path forward—stealing from the ‘pirates,’ with careful distillation of technique from worldview, and aiming for excellence with our eyes on a savior who reigns sovereign over all of life and all the arts.

Chapter Two – *How to Set Sail: Aristotle, Sophocles and William Shakespeare*

With help from the original pirates, this chapter lays out some definitions and basic principles of drama—from the participant’s perspective. Brief discussion of the unique physical nature and historic origins of stage drama, from the Greek amphitheater at Epidaurus to Shakespeare’s Globe, enables understanding of how audiences receive and process onstage action, whether tragic or comedic.

Examples drawn from *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, William Shakespeare’s tragedy *Macbeth*, (the forerunner of *Breaking Bad*), and the contrasting comedy *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are calibrated by helpful analysis from Aristotle’s *Poetics* and *Backwards and Forwards*, an exceptional book on play analysis by David Ball.

Terms: *Act, scene, plot, unity, tragedy, comedy, dramatic irony, reversal, recognition, forwards (David Ball)*

Chapter Three - *Rumbling Cannons: Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov*

This chapter cuts to when Victorian moralizing, in society and onstage, along with the whole worldview and value system of Christian Europe, was interrupted by secular playwrights who shocked audiences with moral relativism in the nineteenth century. From Ibsen's stunning ending to *A Doll's House* to the bleak ambiguity and tragic humor of Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, we see the *telos* of aesthetic choices in drama, and how choices in structure and style are inextricably tied to worldview. Ideas matter, as do the style and choices we dress them in.

In this section, I'll also break down the practical, highly helpful template of the nineteenth century 'well made play' by Eugene Scribe—an armature many playwrights have used to engage and hold their audience.

Terms: *moral relativism, modern drama, Chekhovian.* **Techniques:** *small is big (mining the ordinary), everything connected, raise the stakes, start the countdown, end with a door slam*

Chapter Four - *Hipster Pirates on the Ferris Wheel: Lucas Hnath and Annie Baker*

This chapter draws examines Annie Baker and Lucas Hnath, two contemporary playwrights who reflect Ibsen and Chekhov—and found New York success serving up rehased samplings of their secular, relativistic worldview. Lucas Hnath's play *A Doll's House Part II* literally revisits the rubble left at the conclusion of Ibsen's famous play and Pulitzer-prize winner Annie Baker uses precise, finely-sifted subtext in 'micro-moments' that put an emotional, hipster spin on Chekhovian ambiguity.

Terms: *subtext, pause and beat.* **Techniques:** *small is big (mining the ordinary), raise the stakes, subtext, simple spectacle, reverse course or drop a bomb*

Chapter Five – *Stubborn Pirates: Harold Pinter, Eugene Ionesco, Vaclav Havel*

Chapter five goes right to technique, with savory examples from Harold Pinter, a master of subtext and an audience / actor favorite around the world. With tasty analysis of scenes 'Pinteresque' moments from *Betrayal*, *The Homecoming* and *The Birthday Party*, we see how much tension, conflict and subtext hides in brief, innocuous dialogue of daily life. We also see how subtext and tangential language can misdirect, define backstories and relationships, and escalate small power struggles to gladiatorial showdown. Veering away from menace to heroism, Eugene Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros*, along with Vaclav Havel's sad depictions of sane heroes in absurd, crushing situations inspired by life under communism, (*The Memorandum*, *Largo Desolato*), show dramatic language and structure drumming up powerful resistance to oppression.

Techniques: *irony, subtext, tension and misdirection, dialogue as tactic, turn up to boiling, absurdity in a world we recognize, sane hero in an insane world.*

Chapter Six - *The Vulgar Pirate: David Mamet...with John Malkovich in a Fat Suit*

This chapter zeroes in on the bad boy himself—America’s premier playwright, the original vulgarian who crashed the scene with F-bombs in *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*, tried his hand in Hollywood (he wrote the movies *Wag the Dog*, *State and Main*, and created the T.V. series *The Unit*), and kept the controversy going with a 2008 conversion to political conservatism that earned the ire of the whole New York establishment, (just see the reviews of all his plays since then).

But juicy details aside—and without touching *Bitter Wheat*, Mamet’s 2019 play on Harvey Weinstein that saw John Malkovich caterwauling in a fat suit as the disgraced movie mogul—his plays are splendid case studies in action, plot, tracking with the audience and dialogue that chisels down to what each character wants. With anecdotes from *Three Uses of the Knife*, *True and False*, and *Theater*—Mamet’s superb trilogy on the profession of theater and drama itself—this chapter examines scenes and dialogue of sharp realism and asks what Christians should emulate, question, or throw on out, (aside from the F-bombs...)

Terms: *Gang tragedy. Techniques: Three questions, arrive late; leave early, no exposition, misdirection, tracking with the audience, playing detective, bomb goes off.*

Chapter Seven – *Sensitive Pirates in an Insensitive World: Tennessee Williams, Jean Anouilh and Carson McCullers*

Chapter seven examines pirates whose plays employ a striking, lyrical, emotional realism, with characters who wear their hearts on a sleeve. Tennessee Williams, (*The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*), and the lesser known Jean Anouilh, (*Antigone*, *Ring Around the Moon*), write lively characters who brim with desire, hope, jealousy and every color of the emotional spectrum. Southern novelist Carson McCullers, who adapted her book *The Member of the Wedding* to a simmering stage play, gets an honorable mention.

Techniques: *subtext, narrator as motif, poetic language, tracking with the audience.*

Chapter Eight – *Athletic Pirates: Arthur Miller and Edward Albee*

This chapter pivots back to two more successful post-war playwrights, who marshal dramatic structure, dialogue, action, and character backstory in powerful blasts of Greek

tragedy and viscous dark comedy. From Arthur Miller's devastating tragedies *A View from the Bridge*, *The Crucible*, and *All My Sons*, to Edward Albee's scathing one act *The Zoo Story*, and dark comedy *A Delicate Balance*, we see playwrights wielding drama, tragedy and caustic mockery like a cudgel, hammering scorn and outsider condemnation on American society, Christianity, the nuclear family, capitalism, and the McCarthy hearings of the 1950's. For Christians seeking to push back, or simply write realistic plays that pack a wallop, these pirates show how it's done.

Techniques: *stasis and intrusion, ticking clock, layers and backstory, narrator as motif and conscience, tracking with the audience.*

Chapter Nine - *Singing Pirates: Blood Brothers and The Last Five Years*

This chapter touches briefly on a few musicals that show the structural prowess of Shakespeare and Aristotle. Playwrights need not be composers or lyricists to know that song can function as a dazzling, lyrical motif, a compelling scene or monologue, or a narrative sequence that drives the play forward.

The masterful *Blood Brothers* by Willy Russell includes a singing narrator who represents fate itself, while *The Last Five Years* by Jason Robert Brown involves clever structuring with a husband and wife traveling in opposite directions of time through their five year relationship, singing to each other on their way to marriage and then divorce.

Techniques: *song as motif, as monologue, as scene, as narrative sequence*

Chapter Ten - *Pirates on Screen: Tracy Letts, John Patrick Shanley, Martin McDonagh*

This chapter examines playwrights have made the jump to silver screen. Examining a few recent stage to screen adaptations, we see *Doubt* and *August: Osage County* as stellar dramas, with the sizzling dialogue attracting A list talent. Outlier Martin McDonagh, by contrast, moved from pitch-dark psychological thrillers onstage to some of the darkest, sharpest black comedy ever filmed, (*In Bruges*, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri*).

These examples show trademark stage excellence: crisp, sparse dialogue, sound structure, larger than life characters and compelling conflict that rises to climax without cinematic bells, whistles... and the case of *Doubt*, without the F-bombs.

Techniques: *arrive late; leave early, patterns, human moments, bomb in the basement*

Chapter Eleven - *Pirates Clowning: from Neil Simon to Key & Peele*

With Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple* and the rustic's final performance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a guide, we look at the ingredients that make a situation delectable and funny. Juxtaposition and irony, archetypes, character foils, character contests, patterns we recognize, physicality, mistaken identity—dialogue and witty banter are just icing on the cake. This chapter also examines the origins of sketch comedy, the forerunner to short content now popularized by *Key and Peele*, or *SNL Digital Shorts*. Make a rhythm, take it wherever you want... and then break it.

Terms: *character foils. Techniques: patterns, foils, make a rhythm and break it, get physical, get symmetrical*

Chapter Twelve - *Pirates Clowning without a script: Improv with Monkey Butler*

This chapter discusses an activity that all playwrights (whether shy introverts or staged reading socialites) should try their hand at—*improv comedy*. From energetic short, (think 'Who's Line Is It Anyway') to the long form brilliance seen onstage at *Upright Citizen's Brigade* and *Second City*, we see a practical arena for trying out characters, scenes and possibilities onstage. Get some actors, say 'yes' and see what happens!

This chapter also touches on a recent hotspot of Christians in the arts by discussing the movement of *Monkey Butler* (now *Rogue Improv*) in Los Angeles; an improv school that offered free lessons and concluding prayer to Angelenos, while also winning acclaim with secular counterparts in the competitive L.A. improv scene. To what degree is *Monkey Butler* and its community a model of Christian artists sharpening each other and ushering in cultural reformation?

Techniques: *Yes And! Listening, be ironic, be committed, keep a pattern going*

Chapter Thirteen – *Setting Sail*

Finally, having plundered and sampled to our heart's content, this chapter ends the book with hopeful exhortation—Christ himself, the cornerstone, exemplar and editor of all human drama, secular or Biblical. This chapter concludes by looking at the dramatic potential of some Biblical narratives, celebrated Christian playwrights ignored onstage, and contemporary Christian Theater, from Max McLean's proud monodramas to the subtle Christians creating theater abroad. Time to write that play, rent a theater, and build an audience!

This chapter will list some practical action steps and national opportunities, (both Christian and secular) for aspiring dramatists.

READING NOTE:

As this book is intended for playwrights, actors and directors, it contains relevant spoilers of a handful of plays and helpful anecdotes from a number of nonfiction titles.

If spoilers aren't your cup of tea, then I'd encourage you to work through as much of the reading list below as you please. Many plays can be read in a day, or an afternoon, so reading through them shouldn't set you back too far. The list itself comprises a decent tour through modern drama with some classics for counterweight.

Titles are listed under the chapters that discuss them.

Chapter Two – Classic Pirates

Oedipus Rex by Sophocles

Antigone by Sophocles

Macbeth by William Shakespeare

King Lear by William Shakespeare

A Midsummer Night's Dream by William Shakespeare

Backwards and Forwards by David Ball

Chapter Three - Rumbling Cannons

***Part One – Anton Chekhov; Part Two – Henrik Ibsen**

A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen

Ivanov by Anton Chekhov

The Cherry Orchard by Anton Chekhov

The Rise and Fall of the Well-Made Play by John Russell Taylor

Chapter Four - Hipster Pirates on the Ferris Wheel

A Doll's House, Part II by Lucas Hnath

The Christians by Lucas Hnath

Circle Mirror Transformation by Annie Baker

Chapter Five – Stubborn Pirates: *Harold Pinter, Eugene Ionesco, Vaclav Havel*

The Homecoming by Harold Pinter

The Birthday Party by Harold Pinter

The Arsonists by Max Frisch

Rhinoceros by Eugene Ionesco

The Memorandum by Vaclav Havel

Largo Desolato by Vaclav Havel (translated by Tom Stoppard)

Chapter Six - The Vulgar Pirate

American Buffalo by David Mamet
Oleanna by David Mamet
Theater by David Mamet
Three Uses of the Knife by David Mamet

Chapter Seven – Sensitive Pirates in an Insensitive World

Antigone by Jean Anouilh
The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams
The Member of the Wedding (stage play) by Carson McCullers

Chapter Eight - Pirate Athletes

The Crucible by Arthur Miller
A View from the Bridge by Arthur Miller
All My Sons by Arthur Miller
A Delicate Balance by Edward Albee
The Zoo Story by Edward Albee

Chapter Nine - Singing Pirates

Blood Brothers by Willy Russell
The Last Five Years by Jason Robert Brown

Chapter Ten - Pirates on Screen

Doubt (play and film) by John Patrick Shanley
Fences (play and film) by August Wilson
August: Osage County (play and film) by Tracy Letts
An Inspector Calls (play and film) by J.B. Priestly
Much Ado About Nothing (film) directed by Joss Whedon

Chapters & Twelve Eleven - Pirates Clowning

The Odd Couple by Neil Simon
How to Be the Greatest Improviser in the World by Will Hines

Chapter Thirteen – Setting Sail

Deep Comedy by Peter J. Leithart

Performing the Sacred by Todd E. Johnson & Dale Savidge

Writing Samples

C.M. Miller

Stealing From Pirates Book Proposal

An Introduction

The Mathematician and the Engineer

(The Perfect Preamble for a Book on Drama)

There's an old joke from the faculty lounge. When a fire breaks out in a laboratory, an engineer, a physicist, and a mathematician all spring into action. In a neat division of labor, they split the crackling flames into thirds. Going first, the engineer grabs an extinguisher and sprays liberally, dousing one third of the fire but soaking everything else in sight.

The physicist shakes his head.

"What a waste," he mutters, kneeling down to measure the height, area, and temperature of another third. After writing an equation or two on the whiteboard, he takes the extinguisher and sprays just enough water to put his section of the fire out. When he's done, there's no mess at all.

Going last, the mathematician measures everything he can. He starts scribbling, and before long, calculus fills the whiteboard. Finally, with the flames licking a blackened ceiling, the mathematician turns, folds his arms and declares: "It can be done."

I start with this STEM-flavored quip because it's surprisingly on point.

Writing a quick and dirty book on playwriting for Christian practitioners means lumbering past rows and rows of trim whiteboards filled with calculus, theorems, and *oh so many* measurements.

From Peter J. Leithart's *Deep Comedy* and Elizabeth Schafer's *Theater and Christianity* to Todd E. Johnson and Dale Savidge's *Performing the Sacred*, and even broader titles like *Culture Making* by Andy Crouch, the catalogue of books, blogs, and articles in the contemplative vein are splendid reading.

But with some exceptions, they don't throw much water on the fire.

With nothing against history, academic discourse, and the nuanced parallels between the minor prophets and activist street theater, it's worth remembering that a good play—like a good joke, or even a good viral meme—functions like a punchline. Not a thesis defense.

Rather, and not unlike someone scrambling with an extinguisher and spewing white foam when a fire breaks out, a good play is entertaining. Piquant. Astonishing. For an hour and a half, it claims our precious time and attention and lulls our nagging disbelief to sleep.

As we'll see, writing one is no cakewalk. The discussion of how to do it stretches all the way back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, and forward to the likes of *The West Wing's* Aaron Sorkin. But if we pivot from Broadway, looking around at London's West End, well-heeled MFA programs, city theater scenes, new play initiatives and plush Shakespeare festivals, we find a deluge of how-to manuals on dramaturgy, monologues, the ten-minute format—every shade of playwriting, and all by secular authors. Floating in their wake, we find a few books by Christians, gemlike, but all too dreary in their pining to be the *mathematician*.

In hopes of getting more directors and playwrights right to it, this book is every bit the engineer. At least, it tries to be.

So if you're looking for theory-minded books on Christianity and theater, theater history—or if you're looking for something that lays liturgical tradition next to *Hamilton* lyrics in a Venn Diagram—you might be in the wrong aisle.

Whiplash be damned, *Stealing for Pirates* is for doers.

Actors, directors, producers, and above all, playwrights.

It's for rolling sleeves up and putting fires out. Or rather, and more accurately, for *starting them*. It's for students, designers, producers, and those who know, as vulgarian

David Mamet points out, that acting and playwriting are no genteel professions. It's for watchful theater fans, and anyone studying the eye-popping price of Broadway theater tickets, Hollywood circling the drain with woke melodrama, and a few big players reigning over a stale, lavishly-funded, devoutly progressive theater scene that preaches to its own choir, nonstop, without saying anything new, novel, or truthful.

To that end, and in the gung-ho spirit of seeing the problem and itching to start, I'm writing explicitly to those who take their cue—along with their deepest loves—from the robust, true, and to say the least, *stage worthy* life of Jesus of Nazareth. The author and playwright whose miracles, resurrection, great commission, and cultural mandate means that the ten billion strong ensemble piece isn't over yet.

By His grace, there's time still time to run with this. For as C.S. Lewis points out, a play's only over when the author himself walks onstage for a bow. So with the exception of a few chapters that lay some worldview groundwork, and give a tour of how Christian and secular apologetics alike bind to theater like varnish, it's all firing practice.

Better get those quills sharpened.

We may not be perfect, but if you at look at the stories God writes, the messes come with considerable potential. Like the timid servant who buried his talent, there's little to be gained by standing back, running the numbers... and waiting for someone else to step up.

With a theater landscape that's somehow more shrill, homogenized, and secular-orthodox than ever before—and yet, as the 2020 lockdown of Broadway and theaters everywhere proved, dangerously non-essential—there's plunder to be had for eager playwrights.

Scripts, stages, and rows of seats for the taking.

Deep beneath that, there's dusty, well-worn groves of structure, chiseled out by Aristotle, Shakespeare, the rollicking tradition of medieval mystery plays, and for our purposes here, the secular apostles Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov—along with everyone else who came after them. There's skills, techniques, and subtle maneuvers to be practiced, mastered, and put to good use, from outdoor festivals to youth group attics, to the sixty-seat hideouts of Hollywood's Theater Row and on to the Great White Way.

And believe it or not, with a secular holy movement that's poisoning itself with nonsense, there's a tilting curiosity in what Christian artists, thinkers, and writers might have to say.

All this to say, there's an audience to win.

Chapter One

Copy and Plunder on Any Terrain

From Bezalel to Shakespeare and on to Steven Spielberg, every artist copies. That is, few of the playwrights, painters, or song lyricists we remember started from scratch, and none of them started *ex nihilo*. From story templates and character archetypes that date back to the Bible to the timeless questions that resurface in plays, poems, films, and novels, all building materials are copies of a copy. In this broad vein, and where scores of playwrights have been taught to search within, find something new and unique, and then *fingerpaint*... Christian dramatists, as people of the word, need to know this.

Before setting our sights on the plots, structures, and dramatic techniques that have worked for millennia—and before we think about plundering the dead, white, secular Europeans who sharpened, refashioned, and focused them for the modern stage—we should remember that copying, whether lightly or in full, shameless imitation, animates the creative act.

Noting that there's Biblical and historical precedent for it throughout Church history and western culture, the Christian drama-lover who wants to write splendid plays should start there; and when it comes to copying, and plundering secular counterparts, he should do it with a clean conscience.

Thoughts on copying

After nailing parchments to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Martin Luther crafted hymns from old drinking songs. Long before Luther, and even before God

made circumcision part of his covenant with a tribe of freed slaves that would settle the Mediterranean coastline, the Egyptians were cutting their foreskins off.

Over time, across cultures, and throughout Christendom's two-thousand-and-twenty-year history, people *copy*. Taking their cue from the Creator himself—one who forgave sin and ushered in His kingdom by recasting a horrifying execution method with heroic glory—people refashion, rebrand, recycle, and put their stamp on something that was meant for a different purpose.

If we think of Rome building roads, creating months, days, and the calendar, and conquering the known world, we should also imagine them landing in Greece, rolling up their toga sleeves, and furiously copying the mythology, gods, culture, and nascent, participatory social-political system of a few city states.

In a world where people copy the best, plays and theater are no exception. Plays themselves mimic, copy, imitate, and reshape human interaction. A comedy, tragedy, or one-act drama worth its salt refashions everyday characters, triumphs, defeats, conflicts, resolutions, and astonishments into an unfolding sequence of primal events. In the words of British dramatist Edward Bond, the playwright plies his ware using 'God's scissors.'

Just like Romans copying the Greeks, American playwrights from the 1930's onward copied Ibsen, Chekhov, and the popular ideas of nineteenth century Europe. In form and message, and even with the muscular frameworks of Greek and Christian tragedy, Americans like Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, and even Lin Manuel-Mirada, have been copying Europe's model. Download some song lyrics, or pull a Samuel French title off the shelf, and at the core you'll find some kind of *mea culpa* to the secular gods of humanism, equality, the socialist state, and the troubled, but sanctified, post-modern individual.

It's there all right, whether the practitioners know it or not.

For nearly two hundred years, and with the exceptions of T.S. Eliot, G.K. Chesterton, and a few other outliers, these new gods shaped modern theater, knocking Christian playwrights off the radar.

Hence this book.

But then, and in a brief, organic countermovement in the early 2010's, film actor David Magidoff and some friends from Mosaic Church in Los Angeles put their own spin on the long form improv techniques invented at Chicago's *Second City* and offered them in free workshops, with prayer and fellowship afterward.

As far as Steal the Bacon goes, the game isn't over yet.

Without arguing for outright plagiarism, or tilting to the knee jerk response that Christian fiction, film, and drama can only be taken seriously by copying everything non-Christians like, from F bombs, nudity, and hardcore drug addiction to every other vice on the block, I mention all this to mark the path forward.

And to kick down some doors down while I'm at it.

Door one

Christian plays, like everything written and marketed thirty-something Caucasian moms who tend the cultural gates of the family, must be uplifting, didactic and on message, and congregation friendly. Either straight C.S. Lewis, a la Broadway Star Max Mclean's brilliant monodramas, or Bible crowd-funded set-piece extravaganzas like *The Chosen* are much better than anything else. PG-rated melodrama that makes a splash but then devolves into melodrama, a clunky take home message, and—not kidding here—a deathbed atheist converted in his final moments right outside a Newsboys concert, will also work.

As far as stage plays go, can't go wrong with *The Wizard of Oz*.

Door two

Secular progressives can and should evangelize, worship, afflict nonbelievers, and topple idols.

But Christians cannot.

Any character, plot, type, or performance with a whiff of truth must be:

A) 'Christian' and therefore, terrible by default

B) Well inside the Christian entertainment silo... with a side of cheese.

C) An insider, or ex-evangelicals caricature of the rotten hypocrisy or shrill judgmentalism of the faithful.

And finally, in case this need to be said:

Door three

Nobody copies.

In a world of rebranding, there's nothing stopping those who love both theater and God's word from crafting sharp, potent, stage dramas with the style and techniques that secular humanists baked into modern drama a few centuries ago.

There's nothing stopping us.

Nothing but the self-imposed limits of our own imagination, practice, and the time and energy we're willing to throw at a millennium old artform that's shaped what humans think about reality as much as any other.

If not, at least in the fallen West, probably more so.

Nothing except no money to be had—perhaps a bit of it if you're going the *Pureflix* route. Nothing except our own timidity, or perhaps our fear that if we write, rehearse, and stage it, the audience won't come.

Trust me.

If we do it right, they will.

There are playwrights with good and poor understandings of reality. Then there's plays of excellent, decent, tawdry, or abysmal quality. We've no need of poorly crafted plays that preach a distended, secular, navel-gazing worldview to expectant choirs—see like *The Vagina Monologues* or *What the Constitution Means to Me*. While ho-hum church skits, Easter plays, and straight Bible takes by Christian playwrights have a wonderful role feeding people—even if they make some of us want to chew a limb off—they've got their time and place.

But for all the inflated bumper gutters on either side of the lane, Christian playwrights should see a strike zone. Something like skillfully crafted, entertaining plays

that do their job, bringing hearts and audiences face to face with the searing realities of truth, damnation and belly-laughing grace, all spun by One who interacted with fallen, slippery humans before dying for them.

Thoughts on plundering

Over the late nineties and the early 2000's, plays and musicals in American theaters grew increasingly squishy. That is, they went from something like adult Disney movies to the tertiary stage, the one where all the symptoms—cancerous blotches of secular revolt, gender, sexuality and racial politics, acquiescence to the state, and melodramatic activism rebranded in the 1960's—aren't even hiding.

If we don't like squishy or spineless, what's left for us?

What's left for a curious, intelligent, and increasingly astonished population that's hungry for *anything* that doesn't smell like secular activism? The ones who fancy the idea of being piqued, entertained, and *told something true*... but who have no tolerance for a clunky Palm Sunday skit? Like or not, the pagan pirates who gave us modern theater changed it for the foreseeable future.

So which way, eager dramatist?

Where does that leave playwrights, actors and directors who take no pride in themselves, but see the potential of an untapped, vibrant, artist-generating (as in future *screenwriter, film actor, influencer*) art form to proclaim, struggle through, and explore Christ's sovereignty over every story ever told?

In his conclusion to *Blood Bought World*, Pastor and author Toby Sumpter puts some wind in the sails. Challenging our framework of the Exodus story, Sumpter reminds of God's promise to Moses that not only would the enslaved generation of Israelites escape from bondage, they would *plunder* the gold and jewels of their captors:

“And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians.”

-Exodus 3:21-22

A dozen chapters later, after an enslaved people cross a seafloor with the water held back and wander the desert for four decades before re-occupying a strip of coastline, all that plunder comes in handy. God himself commissions Bezalel and Oholiab, along with every skilled craftsman in sight, to build and decorate a gleaming, breathtaking sanctuary. The riches that Egypt once hoarded now glisten on the walls of what will soon be God's dwelling place, built by a puny tribe of liberated slaves.

If our response to the secular juggernaut of the American theater scene, and its total domination by those who bow to the altar of whatever mascot group is currently trending is anything other than 'we can take these guys,' we should double-check our Bible history. Or the faithful record of a God who plunders enemies, who turns the tables again and again, going before those who love Him for the glory of His name.

There's more than enough hope and confidence here for the lonely Christian to write that script, gather that audience, go to that audition, or rent that hole-in-the wall. Like Bezalel and Oholiab, there's every precedent for writing, acting, and directing with skill and prowess, offering excellence in our work and our craft to God as a living sacrifice, right alongside our lives and our bodies.

As we delight in a savior-plunderer, and in the God who, not that long ago, had actors on wagon wheels acting out his stories for the illiterate millions across medieval Europe, we'll also be bringing something new to the table. Whether that looks like spawning our own theater guides alongside our own plays, or re-infecting the existing landscape has yet to be soon. It might look like building our audiences the way big faith-based streaming services have done, or infiltrating the playhouses of New York, London and Los Angeles with plays that call human nature out for the shoddy wreck it is and leave bread crumb trails of truth and redemption.

But what better place to start than writing? Holding auditions? Staging our own plays with unparalleled excellence, and techniques that serve audiences what they might, deep down, be really hungry for?

On any terrain

Further down the line in church history, we find another parallel.

In a clear example of the softer, risk-prone, but worthwhile approach that stirred Saint Paul to write “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some,” in First Corinthians, Chapter Nine, we see Clement, one of the first Christian scholars, making waves by teaching, debating, and instructing Hellenistic pagans about the Gospel in their own language—Greek philosophy.

In his book ‘Church History in Plain Language,’ and in a chapter on the Alexandrine Christians of the second and third centuries, Dr. Bruce Shelley reminds us that before Clement—and in a long precursor to the secular humanists who came out of Christian Europe—Gnostics had driven a philosophical approach to the Gospel sideways by arguing that matter was evil, and that a physical savior would not suffice. Clement, who understood the arguments of the young and educated coming out of Greece and Rome, worked with their pagan philosophical notions, using them to argue that things like creation, and the existence of evil found their fullest answer in Jesus Christ.

Wary church leaders shook their heads, for reasons any student of Church history will understand. And yet Clement did the impossible, building an audience while walked the line well. He neither strayed from the core message of the Gospel to stay relevant and not offend, nor belittled the questions and ideas of the genuinely curious right off the bat. Shelly acknowledges that this was a high-wire act of meeting and engaging Greek and Roman pagans on their own turf:

“It was a risky venture, especially in Alexandria where the influence of Valentinian Gnosticism was still in the air. The church had reason to be afraid of Greek philosophy and pagan literature. Pagan religion permeated classical literature, and it wasn’t easy to disengage a literary education from the pagan values and religious myths running through the writings.

But the Christian convert often faced a choice between clever, eloquently defended Christian heresy or a dull, narrow-minded orthodoxy. Any informed

Christian in a modern secular world would recognize the problem. Clement was determined to offer a third possibility.”¹

Pausing for a moment to think about Christian playwrights taking aim at a contemporary, Christian-or-not audience, we’re almost right at home. Anyone who’s followed a love of acting, directing, film or theater past high school, a church performance ministry, or even a program at a Christian college has probably lived through this very dilemma.

Pureflix or the Coen Brothers.

The O.C. Supertones and d.c. Talk or Radiohead.

Obvious, unflinchingly predictable Christian cheese, or eloquent, masterful, and culturally dominant heresy. Or in the nooks and crannies of the insulated theater world, where at an impressionable age, nearly every big shot actor and director gets their start, tameness and focus-on-the-message versus real, nuanced, bold-faced characters, *acting* like us and *talking* like us.

If we acknowledge, as author and filmmaker N.D. Wilson frequently does, that the pervasive danger of Christians crafting art for non-Christian audiences is their craving for approval from the secular world, can we also acknowledge, (as N.D. Wilson does) a gnawing hunger amongst those in liminal, non-Church spaces for the source of truth and hope that glistens in every play? Every story and human drama? And like the Hellenistic converts, framed in a way that they can understand?

Examples like Saint Paul, Clement, and even playwright-apologist G.K. Chesterton show us that the lesser traveled, in-between path can be walked out faithfully, with craft, skill, and a touch of daring madness that leads right to the King of Kings. They remind us that championship teams don’t come easy—but they also don’t come by only winning the home games.

¹ Bruce L. Shelley, “Church History in Plain Language.” Thomas Nelson, 2008. Pages 81 – 82.

What then, shall we stage?

Great question. Comedies, tragedies, and straight drama—a secular humanist form of storytelling that can lean tragic, or comic, and one that constitutes the bulk of dramas we consume—are great places to start.

But instead of plays that follow no-frills realism down the off ramp to untouchable feelings, woke melodrama, and a humanistic void that's quickly filled by abortion activists dressed in red cloaks and bonnets, how about comedies that end with marriage? Grand, Shakespearian, play-concluding marriage? With children? Christian tragedies that, like *Macbeth* and *Breaking Bad*, follow the wreckage of damnation right to the source? Tragedies that buckle knees with the fall, make us tremble at the thought of being our own small, howling gods, separated from God, and outside of Christ forever.

What about dramas, musicals, epics, children's dramas, and even churchy sketches that lance the squishy, pseudo-religion of secular humanism and drain the gumption from its mascots? Don't expect a Tony Award, but if we get to work, audiences, students, and people in the theater world will take notice.

As will the one who numbers days and the hairs on our head.

Where shall we stage them? I grant that that's trickier. Especially if you're a hopeful playwright eager to see your work performed somewhere other than a church retreat or your own backyard.

How will we do it?

Like the liberated slaves of Israel, we'll stack our hopes squarely on the God of Israel. We'll get to work plundering, refurbishing, and in the case of a few secular pirates who wrote some superb, form and technique-defining plays for the wrong reasons, *stealing* we can.

But enough game plan.

Time to get started.

Some Starter Reading:

As this book is more of a rogue's gallery than a distilled guide to Western classics, some helpful reading to pin your corners might be:

Macbeth by William Shakespeare

A Midsummer Night's Dream by William Shakespeare

King Lear by William Shakespeare

Oedipus by Sophocles (any translation)

Antigone by Sophocles (any translation)

Backwards and Forwards by David Ball

Three Genres, (Section on Drama) by Stephen Minot

You'll find me referring back to these plots and titles again and again, so it wouldn't hurt to have some background knowledge.

****Samples of complete chapters on Anton Chekhov and David Mamet are available on request**

Stealing for Pirates - The Book and the Market

To my knowledge, *Stealing from Pirates* will be the first book on the craft of playwriting technique for an explicitly Christian audience.

Like the market for books on creative writing, the market for books on playwriting is narrow, but saturated. Truth be told, an abundance of titles, (see the bibliography, to name a few), competes for a small readership. Those who buy a book on playwriting are, in most cases, already knowledgeable and passionate about the subject.

Yet they all assume that the reader is more or less a carbon copy of the author—non-Christian, nominally or devoutly progressive, and eager to worship David Mamet, Lin Manuel-Miranda, or whoever's trending in New York or London. Along these lines, a book for Christians, centered squarely on craft and classical structure, with critical analysis of the modern giants and suggestions for doing better, does not exist.

Countless books by Christian authors already decry our nonexistent influence in the arts and broader culture. Many comb the history of Christian theater, cataloging everything from Medieval mystery plays to obscure works by G.K. Chesterton and T.S. Eliot to Broadway actor Max McLean's masterful Gospel monodramas. Books like *Performing the Sacred* by Todd Johnson, (of Fuller Theology Seminary), build an exegetical case for Christian performance, with broad support from ancient Greece, Biblical theology, and church history.

But they all stop short of discussing actual craft and technique, or providing examples of how structure, technique and worldview come together in plays like *The Crucible*, *Glengarry Glen Ross* or *Hamilton*.

Stealing from Pirates will be the first to feed a narrow, but hungry audience—Christians eager to write, direct and stage new plays, and searching for help in how to do it well.

In each chapter, readers will find:

Pirates - helpful sketches of the major secular playwrights and summaries of their lives, their art, their worldview, and their contributions to modern theater.

Playbooks – clear analysis of the playwright's techniques, goals, influences and worldview, along with breakdowns of specific techniques and dramatic strategies seen in their works.

Plunder – key terms, tips, fun anecdotes, techniques worth imitating, practical considerations of live performance, and careful reflection on what, (for a Christian, eager to do better, hoping to imitate the stories God tells) is worth imitating and why.

Practice – writing and brainstorming prompts to get the juices flowing.

Recommendations for further reading, viewing, or skill development and opportunity (submission venues, theaters open to faith-based works, professional organizations).

In the winsome fashion of standouts like G.K. Chesterton, this book focuses on craft, analysis and technique as the means of forging new, engaging works of theater that cast the sovereignty of Christ over all of the human condition. With classic inspiration from the masters, (Shakespeare and Aristotle), and true hope as our answer to the Twentieth Century's secular-progressive despair, stages and audiences are ripe for the taking.

Practical ideas for promotion and marketing would include theater and English departments in Christian colleges and secondary schools, faith-based reading conferences, and professional organizations like *Christians in Theater Arts*. Christian students at secular colleges or Christians in the theater and entertainment industries align with this intended audience.

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Books for a Christian Audience

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Backwards & Forwards – A Technical Manual for Reading Plays. David Ball,
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About the Author

C.M. Miller is an author, a playwright, and a former teacher. In his theater-addicted life, he's performed in over forty plays, produced and directed, taught lessons on Shakespeare and drama to over a thousand students, introduced young performers to improv comedy and acting, and seen his own plays staged in venues on the West Coast and in the U.K. His one-act comedy *All Packed* was a recent nominee in the Kennedy Center's American College Theater Festival.

Along with writing 'Shelf of Crocodiles' a monthly Substack essay on books and ideas, his film criticism has been published in *City Journal* and *American Greatness*.

He studied theater at the University of California, Riverside before going on to receive an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from New Saint Andrews College.

PLATFORM, PROMOTION:

To promote my book, I am willing and eager to reach out to colleagues locally, (in both Moscow, and Sacramento) and in several Southern California, several of whom teach at universities. As my target audience is college age Christians, young adults, and drama teachers, I would make it a point to reach out to individuals at the national *Christians in Theater Arts* association, the wider community at New Saint Andrews, and former colleagues at schools where I've studied or taught. This includes professors at Biola University, (where I obtained my California Teaching Credential), the University of London, Royal Holloway, and U.C. Riverside, where I obtained my theater degree.

Finally, I wrote bimonthly column on fiction, literature and drama called *Shelf of Crocodiles*, available on Substack.

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